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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether exposure to news media coverage of the 1988 Presidential campaign would be positively related to awareness of and perceptions of the saliency of the Southern regional primary. Subjects, 822 eligible voters from three locations (Arkansas; Memphis, Tennessee; and Birmingham, Alabama) were polled to determine their perceptions of the importance of the Southern Regional Primary. After controlling for variations in demographic and political involvement variables, results indicated that exposure to all news media was positively and significantly related to awareness of the primary, perceptions of increased campaign activity, and perceptions of increased Southern political saliency. Exposure to all partisan information was significantly related to only one dependent variable: perceptions of campaign activity. (Ten references and two tables are appended.) (MS)

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Perceptions of "Super Tuesday" Among Southern Voters

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Abstract

One byproduct of the 1988 Southern Regional Primary may have been a shift in the perceptions of Southerners about the political importance of their region. The last decade and a half of research and theory in mass communication suggests that this kind of symbolic impact is a likely effect of the mass media. Thus, in this study, it was hypothesized that exposure to news media coverage of the Presidential campaign would be positively related to awareness of and perceptions of the saliency of the Southern Regional Primary. Conversely, it was hypothesized that exposure to partisan information about the Presidential campaign would not be related to these criterion variables. The respondents were 822 eligible voters from three locations in the Southeastern United States: Memphis, Tennessee (N=160); Birmingham, Alabama (N=350); and a statewide sample from Arkansas (N=312). The results supported the hypotheses. After controlling for variations in demographic and political involvement variables, exposure to all news media was positively and significantly related to awareness of the primary, perceptions of increased campaign activity, and perceptions of increased Southern political saliency. Exposure to all partisan information was significantly related to only one dependent variable: perceptions of campaign activity.

Introduction

In 1986, Southern Democratic leaders reached an agreement that would lead to the first regional Presidential primary in America's political history. The party power brokers' plan was to use the regional primary to focus national political and media attention on the South, thus elevating the significance of the region in Presidential politics and tipping the scales of party politics in favor of candidates acceptable to the region's more conservative Democratic voters. One byproduct of the 1988 Southern Regional Primary may have been a shift in the perceptions of Southerners about the political importance of their region. In minds of the Southern voter, the great hope expressed over the decades in countless license plates, bumper stickers, and ashtrays may have been symbolically realized. At least for the 1988 Presidential race, it seemed that the South might rise again.

The last decade and a half of research and theory in mass communication suggests that this kind of symbolic impact--the adjustment of public perceptions of the political saliency of the South--is a likely effect of the mass media. The emerging body of theory labeled "meaning theory" by Lowery and DeFleur (1988) postulates that the most significant effects of the mass media are on the public's social construction of reality. Meaning theories, such as agenda setting (e.g. McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Shaw & McCombs, 1977; Weaver et al., 1981) and cultivation theory (e.g. Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Hawkins & Pingree, 1980; Morgan, 1986), would predict that the public's perceptions of the

political importance of the South would change if the media presented a consistent message that elevated the significance of the Southern Regional Primary.

In this study, we assumed a strong and consistent news media message would be presented in the months preceding the Southern Regional Primary and this message would portray the South as more important in the Presidential nominating process. The approach was then to measure the impact of the media's attention on the region to see if attitudes of Southerners about the importance of the South in Presidential politics were related to exposure to this media message, even after controlling for the influence of related demographic and political value variables. In pre-primary surveys, we measured the perceptions of eligible voters concerning the role of the region in Presidential politics as well as simple awareness of the regional primary. We wanted to learn whether those respondents with high exposure to various sources of campaign information perceived the media themes to be more important than did respondents with low exposure to those sources of campaign information.

However, the effects predicted by meaning theory of the news media's portrayal of the Southern Regional Primary may be qualified by other factors. Both Schramm (1954) and Becker (1978) have suggested the effects of particular media messages, such as stories about the Southern Regional Primary, will be modified by the larger information context of those messages.

Schramm's analogy between the formation of stalagmites and the effects of communication on human development illustrates how exposure to different mass media messages might gradually influence perceptions. Schramm suggests that the media produces effects just as "the stalagmite builds up from the calcareous residue of the water dripping on it from the cave roof." Each drop leaves "only a tiny residue." Similarly,

> when we introduce one drop of communication into a person where millions of drops have already fallen and left their residue, we can hardly expect to reshape the personality fundamentally by that one drop (p. 125).

However, many "drops" of communication can leave a lasting impression.

Similarly, Becker's mosaic model of communication highlights the role of memory in assessing the impact of new "bits" of information. For most topics there is an almost infinite collection of information bits among which the audience consumes only a small amount. Audience choices are governed, in turn, by existing attitudes and pictures of reality. New bits of information are added to existing memory about a topic and also interact with related message sets (attitudes). Thus, in the typical situation, new information bits may have a limited influence.

However, Becker also illustrates how on rare occasions the information environment, including both mass and interpersonal communication, can become saturated with information concerning

one topic, making it very difficult for individuals to escape the impact of communication. His description of his personal "communication mosaic" at the time of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. demonstrates how one event can temporarily dominate our communication environment and most likely produce changes in attitudes.

Both Schramm and Becker suggest that the individual's previously accumulated experience with the subject matter, the degree of saturation in the current communication environment, and the individual's exposure to that media environment are of prime importance in predicting the impact of a message. From this perspective, eligible voters are most likely to have their perceptions of a political event shaped by the media, if the event is unfamiliar (as was the case with the Southern Regional Primary), the media's portrayal is consistent (as was assumed in this study), and exposure to the news media's portrayal (in this case from television news, newspapers, and magazines) is high.

Conversely, since partisan sources of political information are much more likely to emphasize the characteristics of candidates and campaign issues rather than the significance of a particular political event, exposure to sources of partisan political information--television advertising, campaign literature, and contact by campaign workers--is much less likely to affect perceptions of importance of the primary.

This theoretical perspective lead to four hypotheses. After controlling for the influence of related demographic and political value variables:

H1: Exposure to news media coverage of the Presidential campaign will be positively related to awareness of the Southern Regional Primary.

H2: Exposure to news media coverage of the Presidential campaign will be positively related to perceptions of the saliency of the Southern Regional Primary.

H3: Exposure to partisan information about the Presidential campaign will not be related to awareness of the Southern Regional Primary.

H4: Exposure to partisan information about the Presidential campaign will not be related to perceptions of the saliency of the Southern Regional Primary.

Method

The respondents were 822 eligible voters from three locations in the Southeastern United States: Memphis, Tennessee (N=160); Birmingham, Alabama (N=350); and a statewide sample from Arkansas (N=312). Respondents' households were randomly selected from residential listings in the most recent telephone directory in Memphis, Birmingham and all Arkansas communities with directory listings. The Arkansas sample was stratified to reflect variations in community size. Four attempts were made to contact each household by telephone. After contact of a household, one eligible voter was randomly selected for interview. The refusal rate was 25%. The sample was 53% female, 81% White, with an average age of 47.4 years and an average of 13.3 years of education. The median household income was between

$19,000 and $30,000. Trained interviewers conducted the surveys during the weeks of February 23 and March 1, 1988.

The exposure to campaign information measures were derived from single item measures used in previous political communication research in the South (Walker, 1987). Respondents indicated on a 4 point scale (never, seldom, sometimes, often) how often they used six sources of information about the Presidential campaign: television news, newspapers, magazines, television advertisements, campaign literature, and contact by candidate workers.

Perceptions of the importance of the Southern Regional Primary were measured using the six, five point Likert scale items listed in Table 1. For these items, a high score meant the respondent perceived that the regional primary had increased the political importance of South; a low score meant the opposite. A principal factor analysis with iterations was performed using these six regional primary perceptions items. Eigenvalue minimums of 1.0 and varimax rotations were used to extract the final factors. The analysis produced a two factor solution which accounted for 30% of the variance. An item was attributed to a factor if it had a loading of at least .4 and did not exceed half its highest loading on the other factor. Factor one included three items (the last three items in Table 1) concerning media coverage of and candidate participation in campaign activities in the South. These items were weighted using their factor loadings and summed to produce the dependent variable, perceptions of campaign activity. Factor two included two items (the first and

third items in Table 1) concerning the increasing saliency of the South in the nominating process. These items were weighted using their factor loadings and summed to produce a second dependent variable, perceptions of southern political saliency.

The third dependent variable, awareness of the primary, was measured using one yes/no item: have you heard that the (Tennessee, Alabama, Arkansas) primary is one of several primaries to be held on March 8th as part of a Southern Regional Primary or Super Tuesday Primary?

Seven control variables--five demographic (sex, age, education, household income, and race) and two political values variables (ideology and partisanship)--were included in the questionnaire. Since ideology and partisanship were used in this study as a measure of political commitment, not of political position, both ideology and partisanship were ranked to reflect the degree of political commitment of the respondent, rather than the direction of that commitment. Thus, strong conservatives/Republicans and strong liberals/Democrats were both given the highest, moderate conservatives/Republicans and moderate liberals/Democrats the next highest, and moderates/independents the lowest ideology and partisanship rank.

Results

Approximately 68% of the respondents had heard of the Southern Regional or Super Tuesday Primary and a strong majority of these "primary aware" respondents agreed that the primary had increased the importance of the South in the presidential nominating process. Table 1 presents the six perception items

and the percentages of primary aware respondents who agreed, disagreed, or had no opinion about each item. Nearly two thirds of these respondents agreed that the regional primary had increased the importance of the South in the nominating process, forced Presidential candidates to be more concerned about the needs of Southern voters, and caused candidates to spend more money on political advertising in the South. Seventy-one percent agreed that Presidential candidates were spending more time campaigning in the South and 80 percent agreed that media coverage of Southern Primaries had greatly increased. However, respondents were more evenly divided over whether the regional primary had reduced the importance of earlier political contests.

Partial correlations were run using awareness of the primary, perceptions of campaign activity in the South, and perceptions of southern political saliency as dependent variables, exposure to six sources of campaign information as independent variables, and the demographic and political values variables as control variables. Thus, the correlations reported in Table 2 reflect the relationship between exposure to campaign information and the three dependent variables after the influence of the control variables was eliminated.

Exposure to information about the Presidential campaign from both television news and newspapers was significantly ($p < .01$) and positively related to both awareness and perceptions of campaign activity, while exposure to newspapers also was related to perceptions of southern political saliency. In addition, exposure to both televised political ads and magazine stories

concerning the campaign was significantly and positively related to perceptions of campaign activity. However, neither exposure to campaign literature nor contact by candidate workers were significantly related to any of the dependent variables.

Two summed variables were computed: exposure to all news media and exposure to all partisan information. Exposure to all news media was significantly and positively related to all three dependent variables. Exposure to all partisan information was significantly and positively related to perceptions of campaign activity.

Discussion

The results of the study indicated that a substantial majority of eligible voters in three Southern locations--Memphis, Birmingham, and Arkansas--saw the 1988 Southern Regional Primary as increasing the political importance of the South. A strong majority of the respondents, who were aware of the primary, agreed with five of the six Southern Regional Primary perception items. Clearly, the message that the South had become a more important player in Presidential politics was received. For these Southerners, the national political agenda had been altered to the benefit of their region.

Assuming a consistent "Super Tuesday" message from the news media, Lowery and DeFleur's (1988) meaning theory as qualified by Schramm's (1954) stalagmite analogy and Becker's (1978) mosaic model of communication would predict that exposure to campaign information would be positively and significantly related to awareness of the primary, perceptions of increased campaign

activity and political saliency. These relationships should occur even after controlling for variables related to political participation: sex, age, household income, education, race, and ideological and partisan commitment. Conversely, the tendency for partisan information to focus on candidates and issues rather than the saliency of the Southern Regional Primary, suggests that exposure to partisan sources of information would be unrelated to awareness of the primary, perceptions of increased campaign activity and political saliency.

The pattern of significant correlations produced in this study generally supports these predictions. Exposure to all news media was positively and significantly related to all three dependent variables, thus supporting hypotheses one and two. Exposure to all partisan information was significantly related to only one dependent variable: perceptions of campaign activity, thus providing partial support for hypotheses three and four. More specifically, of the three sources of partisan information, only exposure to television advertisements was significantly related to perceptions of campaign activity. However, this significant relationship may be spurious since one of the three items used to measure perceptions of campaign activity concerned perceptions of candidate spending on political advertising, including television advertising.

Of the individual sources of campaign information newspapers showed the most consistent relationships to the three dependent variables. Exposure to campaign stories on television newscasts was more strongly related to awareness of the primary, but more

weakly related to the two perception items. Although both television news and newspapers contributed to awareness of the primary and perceptions of campaign activity, only newspapers contributed to shifts in perceptions of southern political saliency. Perhaps the more detailed coverage available in newspapers was necessary to convince Southerners that Super Tuesday was really "super."

The results of this study suggest that the Southern Regional Primary produced, at least temporarily, a shift in Southern perceptions of the political significance of the region in Presidential politics. This effect was slight stronger for eligible voters with high exposure to either television news or newspaper accounts of the Presidential campaign. As a result of Southern Regional Primary and the news media's coverage of it, a majority of Southern voters believed that, in Presidential politics, the South had risen again.

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Table 1

Perceptions of the Importance of the Southern Regional Primary

	Agree	Disagree	No Opinion
The March 8th Southern Regional Primary will greatly increase the importance of Southern states in the Presidential nominating process.	65%	13%	22%
The March 8th Southern Regional Primary will reduce the importance of the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary in the Presidential nominating process.	40%	33%	27%
Because of the March 8th Southern Regional Primary, most Presidential candidates are more concerned about the needs of the Southern voter.	65%	23%	12%
Because of the March 8th Southern Regional Primary, news media, such as newspapers and television, have greatly increased their reporting about Presidential primaries in the South.	80%	9%	11%
Because of the March 8th Southern Regional Primary, most Presidential candidates are spending more time campaigning in the South.	71%	19%	10%
Because of the March 8th Southern Regional Primary, most Presidential candidates are spending more money on political advertisements in the South.	64%	18%	18%

Table 2

Partial Correlations
Sources of Campaign Information with
Awareness of the Southern Regional Primary
Perceptions of Campaign Activity
Perceptions of Southern Political Saliency

	Awareness	PCA	PSPS
	N=822	N=542	N=542
All News Media	.20*	.17*	.14*
Television News	.23*	.11*	.06
Newspapers	.17*	.12*	.15*
Magazines	.05	.12*	.05
All Partisan Information	.08	.14*	.09
Televised Ads	.07	.14*	.08
Campaign Literature	.04	.09	.04
Contact by Candidate Workers	.05	.05	.06

* $p < .01$.